# Anti-Americanism Heads South of the Korean Divide

**Asia**

By William McGurn

PANMUNJOM, Korea — Here at the front lines of an uneasy armistice that has held for more than 35 years, metaphor reigns. The barbed wire looped 151 miles across the belly of the Korean peninsula points to a war that has never ended; the granite-flecked mountains bespeak the inflexibility of the governments on either side of the divide; and the visible presence of the U.S. Eighth Army reminds that a bond conceived in blood almost four decades ago remains firm today.

Or does it? The rebirth of democracy in South Korea, the country's successful hosting of the 1988 Summer Olympics and its opening to the hitherto forbidden communist world are together calling the old assumptions into question. While most South Koreans continue to regard the U.S. as their best friend, they would like to see Washington begin to treat Seoul more as a partner. Radicals go further, blaming America for the division of the peninsula. In recent months they have been taking their case to the streets in a way that now has American GIs wondering whether they're here to protect South Korea from invasion by North Koreans or themselves from attacks by South Koreans.

Like most things in the Land of the Morning Calm, anti-Americanism is easily exaggerated. Yet it exists, and its angry manifestations are on the rise. Last week saw another attempt by students—their third this year—to storm the U.S. Information Service building in downtown Seoul. Just days earlier other protestors, armed with firebombs and iron pipes, went on a rampage through the Hannan Village complex where the families of U.S. military personnel live, the first such assault on a civilian target. The middle class, too, is beginning to vent frustration, offended by the behavior of American athletes and press during the Olympics as well as by what they perceive as U.S. bullying of a weaker ally over trade issues. Above all, the reemergence of unification as a national priority is leading South Koreans to take a second look at Uncle Sam at a time when their knowledge of the outside world is still spotty.

"The establishment here has taken U.S. relations for granted for too long," says the minister for unification, Lee Hong-Koo, over a breakfast of waffles and maple syrup. "These incidents indicate there is no longer automatic good will. It's something we will have to work at."

Americans might be surprised at the passion for reunification here—the Korean for this is *yul mang*, or "fervent desire"—and would certainly be appalled to find themselves now considered the main obstacle to its achievement. Minister Lee notes, however, that the Korean perspective has been distorted by years of dictatorship, when foreign travel was closed, information limited to government propaganda, and discussion of unification banned. An intellectual void was created that favored the left, and some of the ideological mud has stuck. To a reporter's remark that Americans want to see a free and united Korea, for example, a pig farmer in Ichon shoots back: "Who drew the line at the 38th parallel?"

The reference is to the Allied decision in 1945 that America would accept the Japanese surrender below the parallel and the Soviets above it, the line becoming permanent when the Soviets refused United Nations calls for countrywide elections and instead installed Kim Il-Sung in Pyongyang as the dictator of a communist North. Yet a poll conducted last month by the International Affairs Research Institute of Seoul's National University disclosed that only 1.6% of students consider the U.S. Army "liberators"; a scant 12.5% agree that the Korean War was "North Korea's war of aggression at Soviet instigation"; and 60.4% believe the U.S. Army perpetuates the Korean divide. The machinations of the North notwithstanding, a good part of these attitudes have to do more with ignorance than ideology.

U.S. pressure for South Korea to "solve" the trade-deficit "problem" by appreciating the won only provides the Yankee-Go-Home crowd with more ammunition. Ask anyone here what he knows about Secretary of State-designate James Baker, for example, and he's apt to tell you Mr. Baker used President Roh Tae-Woo's inauguration to call for a revaluation of Korea's currency. Although the U.S. is right to complain about closed Korean markets, it helps to remember that per-capita income here is below $3,000, and many Koreans thus see trade pressure in terms of big America picking on little Korea.

Public hearings this month in the National Assembly focused on what some argue was America's tacit approval of the brutal suppression of the 1980 Kwangju rebellion heighten such tension, and the local press is having a field day playing up the inevitable brawls and mishaps involving American servicemen. U.S. press coverage of the Olympics, too, is a sore spot, with NBC's repeated broadcast of a clip showing Koreans jumping into an Olympic boxing ring to beat up a referee itself escalating into an international incident. And it's hard to overlook the piece of real estate the U.S. Army occupies in Seoul: a site equivalent to New York's Central Park, complete with golf course.

At bottom, South Korea's growing sensitivity to real or imagined slights is a cover for the embarrassment at the continued division of the fatherland. Koreans are even more racially pure than the Japanese, and they reject the German model because they believe it means accepting a permanent division not of a nation but of a people. So although President Roh's kimchi ostpolitik has to date yielded only 88 pounds of much-photographed North Korean clams that arrived here last Tuesday via Japan; Koreans all want it pursued. "Every time there is a breath of fresh air here unification resurfaces as an issue," says a longtime American resident.

America's easing of restrictions on contact with North Korea in response to a request from the Roh administration, was thus appreciated. But the U.S. must also avoid cutting into Seoul's dance. Pyongyang would like nothing better than direct talks with Washington, an offer repeated this month, the purpose of which is to show up South Korea as the "American stooge" Kim Il-Sung claims it is. In this charged atmosphere even reasonable statements can explode, and a Bush administration too eager about the possibilities of Korean detente could arouse as much suspicion as one that was too reluctant.

Ultimately Washington's best bet is simply to let freedom take its course following President Roh's political reforms. In the short run this probably means putting up with Korea's nationalistic excesses while waiting for emotions to level out. For in the long run, interests between America and South Korea remain intact, the general good will on both sides still obtains, and the real anti-Americanism is confined to a minority of students. "After many years of authoritarian rule people just want to see for themselves," says one of President Roh's top cabinet advisers, Hyun Hong-Choo, minister for legislation. "Once they understand that they now have a free press, see the hearings on television, and start to realize that there is nothing being hidden from them, the students will be less influential and we can get on with the normal business of any country."

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